

Allan Bloom

Shakespeare's

RICHARD II

SHAKESPEARE NOT ONLY presents us with the spectacle of a man becoming a god (Julius Caesar) but in *Richard II* also permits us to witness a god becoming a man. As a consequence of what one might call political logic, Richard was thought to be, and thought himself to be, somehow divine: to have the right and the capacity to rule men a king ought to have a superior nature, must be a god or the representative of a god; because he must be, he is. The play tells the tale of Richard's unkinging and his agony as he faces the human condition for the first time.

Richard II is also the tale of Henry Bolingbroke's grasping of the crown and thereby his loss of innocence. He thought he would purge the throne of a stain left on it by Richard's having committed the sin of Cain, but he is constrained to commit the same sin in order to found his rule. Instead of becoming a god, he becomes a murderer. The king he became could never be the king Richard was.

Thus these two tales join to tell a third tale, that of kingship in its divine claims and criminal foundations.

I

In spite of what some critics say, there can be little doubt that Shakespeare teaches us that Richard is a sort of legitimate tyrant who deserves to be deposed. Moreover, he chooses to present the divine right of kings as the underpinning of Richard's rule and thereby teaches that the principle is responsible for his tyrannical deeds. Richard never understands the real conditions of rule and believes that he is unaccountable. This does not mean that Shakespeare holds there to be

nothing divine in kingship; nor does it mean that Shakespeare believed that once Richard's undisputed title to rule vanishes, there could ever be an unproblematic legitimacy in this world. But that is precisely the burden of the play: legitimacy is a problem, and Richard, God's vicar, is an artificial contrivance which disguises rather than resolves the problem.¹

Similarly, the fact that Bolingbroke's accusations are true does not mean that his motives are good or that he understands what he is about. He entertains the baseless certainty of a tribunal beyond the king's to which he can appeal, which will vindicate him and give him ground on which to stand. And he wants rule; his accusations are pretexts for supplanting the king. He does not wish to reform Richard but to replace him. Strangely, though, Shakespeare seems to have more sympathy with Henry's ambition than his indignation, for the perfect justice demanded by the latter passion has no foundation in politics and the quest for it is even pernicious, while the former passion is an expression of the manliness so lacking in this regime and so necessary to political virtue. Such manliness—to be found in the Roman heroes and in Henry's son Henry—rebels against rule by others and, properly educated and channeled, is the surest foundation of freedom. Richard becomes manly only for a moment at the very end when it is too late. And Henry, who began by being manly, loses his nerve when he realizes the consequences of what he has done. He cannot bear to accept the responsibility, tries to return to the old pieties and becomes humble. But his pride has set in motion tendencies which are to culminate in a wholly new world, one in which the pride of noble men will have its place and rule will require prudence and courage as well as birth.

In keeping with the purely conventional character of a regime where the ruler is absolute and his title is only birth supported by a

¹Henry IV does not affect us as a usurper whose crime is the cause of his misery. The presentation of Richard and Henry is too carefully banked with extenuating considerations to allow for simple blame of the latter or respect for the former. The play's impact is not such as to induce reverence for the king (either the old one or the new); rather, there is a subversive element in the detachment it induces. We pity the toothless descendant of Richard the Lion-Hearted; he is shown to possess neither divine nor human strength, and he no longer inspires awe. We experience no horror at what Henry does, but on the other hand, he does not inherit Richard's former sacredness. Moreover, the reader of the *Histories* as a whole can hardly believe that Shakespeare thought John or Richard to be rulers superior to Henry V or Henry VIII. Shakespeare's view of kingship and legitimacy is subtle and cannot be reduced either to reverence for tradition or bald rationalism. But one thing is certain: Henry V and Henry VIII face up to their priests as neither John nor Richard II does; and this seems to be at the core of the teaching of these plays.

fiction of divine right, the atmosphere of *Richard II* is suffused with artificiality of speech and deed. This artificiality is particularly to be remarked in the relationships among human beings. At the outset it is taken for granted that the just man is to be proved in trial by combat and that God, just as He is immediately present in the king, will directly indicate where the truth lies by the victory in arms. Divine action and brute force preempt entirely the field properly governed by prudence. God is just and provides a law behind which He stands, but human reason cannot penetrate to His reasons and plays no role in the system of justice. Richard, despite his fears that the result of the combat will inculcate him, is constrained by the rules of honor to permit it. But this aborted combat on St. Lambert's day in the lists at Coventry is the last trial by combat England will ever see. When Richard II recognizes that the risks are too great for him and halts it, he unwittingly brings the era of chivalry, the era of Christian knights inaugurated by the first Richard, the Lion-Hearted, to its end. By Act IV the challenges of the lords have become empty bluster and a parody of what they had been. They will never be committed to a test. New ways of settling disputes and determining the right will have to be found.

Thus at the outset we see "medieval" England, but we also see that it is moribund. A criminal king against whom there is no recourse is opposed to an ambitious potential successor who comes ever closer to challenging the sacred person of the king himself. And the supports of the old order—represented by the dukes of Lancaster and York—are themselves old and have lost conviction. Lancaster passively leaves the issue to heaven and dies, while York, who is really a comic figure, provides the transition to the new order. The principle of the old order is enunciated by Gaunt in his discussion with the Duchess of Gloucester (I, ii), and he embodies its dignity. One must bear with insults and apparent injustices in this world in the conviction that they are expressions of God's infinite goodness. Unswerving loyalty and faith against all the evidence of the senses and merely human reason is the subject's proper posture.

God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in his sight,
Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against his minister. [I, ii, 39-43]

But the duchess represents the problem in Gaunt's principle and the countervailing principle. Her husband has been murdered, and he was

Gaunt's brother. Outraged family feeling ought to seek vengeance. The ordinary sentiments, directly experienced by all normal human beings, are suppressed in favor of a purely arbitrary duty to obey the king. Whereas all the principal men in *Richard II* are artificial, and none particularly admirable, the three women in the play (Richard's queen and the Duchess of York in addition to the Duchess of Gloucester) are all both natural and admirable. They love their husbands and their children. Humanity, banished by the men, seems to have taken refuge in the women. For varying but related reasons these women cannot depend on the men in their families; and in their sufferings they do not appear to hope in God. They endure, and in their fortitude they provide a measure for the failings of the men to whom they are most nearly related—the Duchess of Gloucester to Gaunt, the queen to the king, the Duchess of York to the Duke of York. In the scene under discussion the audience cannot but side with the Duchess of Gloucester against Gaunt, nor can one help but feel that if Gaunts are the subjects, the rulers will be Richards. Disarming good men is equivalent to arming evil men.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the first two acts are intended to establish Richard as an evil king who deserves to lose his throne. He is shown to be a murderer, a thief, a wastrel surrounded by flatterers, lacking in all the familial pieties—a monarch without care or conscience. He is convicted before our eyes of all the accusations made against him, and this portrait is relieved by no charming features. Bolingbroke's schemes are thereby given the color of justice. By the end of Act II power and loyalty have slipped away from Richard as a rightful consequence of his crimes. But even if Bolingbroke is right in deposing Richard, that fact alone does not suffice to make him king. He has justice on his side, as well as the talent to govern in these troubled times, a secondary title of inheritance,² the consent of the nobles, and the adherence of the people. But all of this does not quite add up to Richard's indisputable family title and the sense of divine right apparently attached to it.

Henry's problem is posed and solved in comic fashion by York, the last remaining son of Edward III and the last remaining fragment of the old regime. Although he has reproved his nephew Richard for depriving Henry of his inheritance, as Lord Governor in Richard's absence he loyally forbids Henry entry into England and treats him as a rebel. But he possesses no power and certainly lacks the energy

²Bolingbroke is next in line to the succession after the infant Earl of March, grandson of the Duke of Clarence, Edward III's second son. Cf. *Richard II*, I, i, 120–21; iv, 36–37, New Variorum edition, ed. Black (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1955).

or the conviction to be a martyr to Richard's cause. So he declares himself neuter and invites the rebels to spend the night at his place. York's neutrality symbolizes the exhaustion of the old order. He solves his own problem by ending up a fanatic adherent of the new king, acting as though Henry were the old king. The example of Henry's change from subject to ruler teaches a lesson which York desperately tries to suppress, one from which other subjects will nonetheless profit.

II

Suddenly, at the beginning of Act III, Richard, who is no longer really king and is beginning to realize it, becomes interesting. As he descends to the estate of mere man, his soul is inspired by the poetic muse. It is as though Shakespeare wished to tell us that the most divine in man is man. He provides Richard with the play's most beautiful lines to allow him to voice questions about what he might really be when he discovers he is not what convention told him he is. He never succeeds in finding himself, but we see the articulation of his soul as he gropes toward his goal. We do not find that Richard is ever good, but we do find him touching.

Richard returns to England from the Irish wars to find his neglected country torn by rebellion. He speaks confidently to the earth of England which he takes to be animate and loyal, reminding it of his expectation that its flora and fauna will take up the cause of its rightful king. When chided by his episcopal adviser Carlisle, who tells him that God helps those who help themselves, he responds by comparing himself to the sun and announces that for every rebel soldier God provides Richard with a fighting angel. But when he hears that his Welsh troops have departed, he becomes disconsolate, only to regain confidence when he thinks of his uncle York's troops. Again his mood wavers when he expects to hear bad news from Scroop. Now he takes the tack of resignation. Of what value are human things? They are nothing when seen in the perspective of God's power or in that of the bleakness of death. All men are equal in both perspectives. Richard is ready piously to accept the vicissitudes of life. Being a king was nothing but a care to him. As he was confident in being everything, he professes himself resigned to being nothing. But, suddenly, he suspects that he has been betrayed by his friends, and now he is the man-God, Jesus, abandoned by all, surrounded only by Judases. And finally, when he learns that the man about to become king has executed his close associates, Richard collapses in despair:

let us sit on the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings.
(III, ii, 158–59)

Then once more he responds to the chidings of Carlisle and remembers York's troops. But when he learns that York is with Henry, he knows he is no longer king and abandons all hope. He had hoped in God's arms, the Welsh arms, and York's arms. He has no arms of his own, nor does he imagine trying to get them. Richard is night, Henry day. A new sun has risen.³

As is evident, Richard's moods are mercurial. But what is most striking about them is that they move between two poles and never point to another alternative. He is either hopeful or despairing, arrogant or humble, the glorious king or the poor man menaced by death. There is no middle ground.

I'll give my jewels for a set of beads
My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,
My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,
My figur'd goblets for a dish of wood,
My sceptre for a palmer's walking staff,
My subjects for a pair of carved saints,
And my large kingdom for a little grave,
A little little grave, an obscure grave.
(III, iii, 155–62)

The little piece of time between the two eternities—God and death—that comprises human life has no status for Richard. Yet it is only in this interval that political life is to be found, somewhat independent, and perhaps a bit forgetful, of God and death. The statesman must not be overwhelmed by the power and glory (not to mention the high moral demands) of God nor disheartened by the shadow cast over his concerns by death. He must trust in his own efforts and take seriously the goals of life, liberty, and glory. He must respect this world. But just as Richard's reign is founded on the God of the Christians, he has a Christian view of the world. He is either like God, or like Jesus, or like a monk or a hermit. He is never a political man. He is imprisoned in Julius Caesar's tower⁴ but has no other connection with such men.

Richard has frequently been compared to Hamlet, for both possess histrionic natures. They are also alike in that Hamlet too views things in extremes, extremes which derive from a Christian's perspective.

³III, ii.
⁴V, i, 4.

The Hamlet who is unwilling to kill the usurper while at prayer for fear that his soul will be saved and who thus loses his chance to right things in the realm is akin to Richard. They are both actors of their parts rather than being what they are, and they see this world through the optic of another world and thus transform it. And these two characteristics are probably effects of a single cause.⁵

Richard, like Gaunt, is able to see only divine justice or brute force, God's pastorate or a tyrant's arbitrariness. A world in which men are responsible for the defense of justice and provide for its rewards and punishments is unknown to him. This is underlined in III.iv, which immediately follows the two scenes on which the foregoing reflections are based. Richard's sweet queen wanders in the Duke of York's gardens and overhears the conversation of the gardener and his assistant. They are humble men; but for that very reason, in a world where everything high is conventional and artificial, Shakespeare makes them speak the language of nature and reason. They, like the women in this play, help to supply what cannot be gotten from the high-born, convention-ridden men. These two artisans compare their garden to the state and explain what should have been done by Richard and why his failing to do it has caused his downfall. They ascribe to an absence of art what others understand to be a result of God's will and men's sins. One cannot help being reminded of *Prince XXV*, where Machiavelli interprets what men call fortune or God's action in politics as a lack of prudence or foresight. Floods, he says, injure men not because they are sinners but because they did not build dams. These two workers suggest that art, in cooperation with nature, can make states as well as gardens grow. The founding of political science requires only a clear vision of things. But it is precisely that natural vision which is hard to achieve, for the prospect is clouded over by myths which must first be dispelled. The queen angrily reproaches the gardeners for committing the sin of Adam, for eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and thus bringing about a second Fall. The only defense she can contrive for her husband is to view this not as nature's garden, given over to the control of rational men who can make it

⁵Mowbray is an interesting example of the political man living in this kind of world. He is a scoundrel, capable of all kinds of crimes. But he is also a believing Christian, praised as a defender of the faith against the infidels. He is a Christian knight from the times of the Crusades. He is a great sinner and a great repentor. He has a conscience and confesses. Although he takes political things seriously, they are for him apparently low. His Christianity affects him primarily, if not solely, insofar as it debases his view of human life and politics. All the great things are somewhere else, beyond this sphere, but he is still involved in politics. He is treacherous without any of the great justifications one finds in great political men. And his treachery is compromised by his conscience. (I, i, 83-150; IV, i, 91-100.)

produce fruit for their sustenance, but as God's garden, the Garden of Eden, ruled directly by God, producing what God wills without the cooperation of man, whose inquiries into the mysterious ways of the ruler would be a sin. As gardeners should not put their hands to God's garden, rational subjects should not question Richard's state. This vision makes political science impossible and renders the attempt to establish it a sin, the sin of disobeying the ruler and of attempting to replace him. Piety, not art, is the foundation of Richard's state, and the emancipation of art requires the overturning of that state.

The case for Richard's rule is made by the finest or at least the most disinterested man among the principals, the Bishop of Carlisle. (It goes without saying that Richard's touching eloquence does not make a case for his remaining as king. It only gives witness to the noble aspect of what makes him unfit to be a king.) Carlisle stands up before Henry and warns him not to depose the king. With his ". . . if you rear this house against this house,"⁶ he accurately prophesies the horrors of the Wars of the Roses. The overturning of one monarch provides argument for the overturning of another. There must be established authority and agreed-upon legitimacy. He believes that only divine right can establish such legitimacy, and an attack on the king is an attack on God. The dire consequences of such an attack Carlisle evidently attributes to God's wrath, although civil war would appear to follow naturally from the absence of a recognized sovereign. We would conclude that if Richard's rule is a failure, then some other source of legitimacy must be sought for. The king in his nation, according to Carlisle, is the image of God in the world. And everything that Richard is or is not derives from that vision of the whole. God's rule of the whole is the source of Richard's rule in England, and the latter seems to be the necessary consequence of the former. If there is something wrong with the order in England, it is probably related to something wrong with the cosmic order on which it is modeled.

This order is one in which prophecy takes the place of foresight, and Carlisle's prophecy is the supplement to Gaunt's earlier prophecy.⁷ Gaunt treats England as a living being, its constitution, like that of a body, inseparable from it and unchangeable. Richard will be purged like a disease. Gaunt's indignation does not lead to rebellion, and none seems possible. Country and constitution are identical; rulers are produced out of its womb; one is oneself a part of one's country and one must love it. Carlisle, on the other hand, sees England's

⁶IV, i, 115-50.

⁷II, i, 33-70.

Christianity as something separable from it and knows the possibility of rebellion and change. Christianity is universal, and a nation can either participate in it or not. His loyalty is to Christianity. For him Christianity is represented by Richard. If England is to be purged of Richard, an element of that purgation must be a change in the nation's relation to Christianity, most specifically to God's representatives, the king and the priests. Carlisle forces us to correct Gaunt's vision. If England is to be free from the danger of Richards, there must be a change in the constitution and the spirit informing it. To render England unto itself the elements of the nation must be separated out and certain alien matter be removed. Only at the end of the history plays is there a king, Henry VIII, who is himself really the high priest and interprets the divine in such a way as to serve England. The eighth Henry is truly at home; Richard was only a stranger; and this he learns when he looks at himself in the mirror. A long and bloody path leads from Richard to Henry VIII, a path on which Englishmen learn that kingship is founded on nobles and commoners as well as on God. This mixture is perilous but through it wisdom can at least occasionally peep without being sinful or causing civil war. Carlisle shows us both the greatest dignity and the greatest weakness of the old order. God is supposed to rule; Richard actually rules. Without his faith that God protected him, he would have taken more care.

III

In the final act, York completes his comedy, Richard completes his tragedy, and Henry begins his career as a guilt-ridden, world-weary man, insecure and plotted against, distrusting even his own son.

Old York, the crumbling pillar of both the old and new order, tries madly to persuade himself that they are identical by accusing his son of treason and demanding his death. His son was loyal to Richard and thus is disloyal to the usurper. York abandons Richard and, aping a Roman citizen, demands his own son's death as a punishment for disloyalty. The Roman's deed inspires awe because it proves firmness of soul and is done for the unquestioned common good and in the name of the most ancient and unquestioned authority. But after what has already transpired, nothing York could do would prove his firmness of soul. And Aumerle's adherence to Henry would imply the abandonment not only of his sovereign but his friend. It is ridiculous to suppose that Henry can command instinctive loyalty. That is exactly his problem. Attachment to him must be born of his wisdom, beneficence, and strength, for he is beginning afresh without the sanctions

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which were available to Richard. York's conduct merely puts that problem in relief and strikes us as horrible or absurd. The Duchess of York wins the sympathy of everyone, including the new king, with her defense of her son, springing as it does from a mother's natural affection. Such sentiments are taken more seriously now that the old structure of obligations has collapsed, and they must become part of the new structure if it is to hold. Henry's clemency is a start in that direction.⁸

Richard, despised and abandoned, having suffered the insults of the crowd, no longer looks to his divine Father for special protection. He surveys his situation and finds only his loneliness and vulnerability. He compares his prison to the world and populates it with his thoughts representing the different alternative lives, none of which can satisfy him. The life lived in the hope of the afterlife is contradicted by the demands of greatness on this earth. The king's glory and wealth are opposed by the commandments of humility and poverty. The Christian king imitates God while God calls the "little men." Being a king seems to preclude hopes for eternal bliss. The life of ambition cannot succeed, for it demands powers beyond those available to man. And the life of Stoic contentment does not work. Richard does not quite say why, but he indicates that such a posture only makes the best of a bad business and would be abandoned once out of misfortune: there is no true self-sufficiency. This is the popular view of philosophy, as expressed when one says, "He's taking it philosophically," a phrase never used when good things happen. Of the three alternatives it is fair to say that Richard has only thought through and experienced the first. Here at least he breaks out of its constraints but gives only a hasty glance at the other two. It is too late to consider them seriously. Richard's life and fall are marvelously illustrative of the first, which is the Christian alternative and is the one which dominated his world. Others would have to investigate the other ways of life, for Richard himself immediately slips back into his old choice between being a king or a beggar, or the synthesis of the two—nothing. At the last moment, tired of acceptance and drawing on an instinct of which he has hitherto been unaware, he rises to his own defense and fights his attackers. He dies like a man and as a man.⁹

When Henry learns that his wishes are fulfilled, that his rival, the question mark after his legitimacy, has been slain for him, just as Gloucester was slain for Richard, he is stricken with remorse. He

⁸V, ii-iii.

⁹V, v.

accuses himself of the sin of Cain, as he had accused Richard, and vows to go on a crusade. He salves his conscience by trying to return to the chivalric tradition which he has just uprooted. This crusade will never take place because business at home is too pressing. His conscience takes his heart away from home, but home preempts his action. He is split. He cannot bear to face the possibility that the sin of Cain, as Machiavelli teaches, may play a role in the establishment of earthly justice. In deposing Richard he was halfway to the realization that he was committing a crime but that such crimes are sometimes necessary for the common good. However, so strong is his faith or his fear of hell-fire, he prefers to brand himself a guilty man and cripple his political sense and dedication rather than admit what his deed has shown.¹⁰ His son returns to his father's original impulse and with healthy self-assurance abandons crusades in favor of unjust wars with France which serve the evident interests of England instead of serving his conscience, using the priests as his political ministers rather than as the masters of his beliefs. He thus unifies England and himself. The *Henriad* as a whole shows the limits of conscience. Henry V provides a contrast to his predecessors not unlike the contrast between Hamlet and Fortinbras in a play that seems to bear a similar message. The exquisitely refined souls do not belong to the best political men.

There are two sins mentioned in *Richard II*: the sin of Adam and the sin of Cain. They seem to be identical, or at least one leads to the other. Knowledge of political things brings with it the awareness that in order for the sacred to become sacred terrible deeds must be done. Because God does not evidently rule, the founder of justice cannot himself be just. He cannot be distinguished from the criminal by his justice or anything else accessible to vulgar eyes. This capital problem was addressed long ago by Sophocles who showed that the hero who solved the riddle of the Sphinx and thereby discerned man killed his father and slept with his mother. Machiavelli later repeated the teaching, perhaps in perverting it. I do not suggest that here Shakespeare stopped, but here he surely began. The universal problem of kingship is played out in the particular events of England by Shakespeare, who in his histories could be more philosophic than the historian because he was a poet. He gave England a mirror in which it could recognize itself as it ought to be, one which England would not have to smash as Richard smashed the mirror which reflected his image.